



Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey - Black Oral Histories 1983/146

Oral interview of
Albert Hicks

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The interview you are about to hear took place on November 7, 1983, at the home of Mr. Albert Hicks. Mr. Hicks is a 40 year resident of Sacramento and was one of the founding board members of the Sacramento Area Economic Opportunity Council, better known as SAEOC in 1965. Mr. Hicks offers a broad range of insights and historical recollections of the early beginnings of SAECO and its influence upon the local Black community here in Sacramento. In another capacity, Mr. Hicks also gives us insight into the development of the Glen Elders area in Southeastern Sacramento City from its beginnings in 1955 to its present status today. Mr. Hicks is active in the Boy Scouts and is a retired Electronics Technician from the Sacramento Army Depot. Mr. Hicks currently resides in the Meadowview area of Sacramento and is enjoying life.

Clarence: Mr. Hicks, could you tell us a little something about yourself and about your earliest beginnings in Sacramento.

Mr. Hicks: I came to Sacramento after leaving out of the Army in 1945. I raised a family and we probably got into Boy Scouting and Cub Scouting to bring my kids along and finally in 1955 we had very good Boy Scouting in the [hard to hear, counter 15] and then in late 58 there was a, some kid got drowned in the creek out there in Glen Elder and at that time we saw fit that they needed some representation for the Board of Supervisors, City Councils, and School Board so we formed our organization and got on the City to put a fence around the creek at that time. We had stop signs and we had to bring in petitions for sewers and the whole ball of wax, and at that time we had [hard to hear, counter 020] ground [hard to hear, counter 021] well five of us stuck together there right on up until the public road came along, and at that time I was elected to serve on SAEOC to represent the neighborhood. I was one of the, I worked on the Board and I helped

raised \$460 [hard to hear, counter 023] rent when they first got started, and when I left the Board we was up in you know \$5 million, so. Each neighborhood, six favorite [hard to hear, counter 024] target neighborhoods. As a matter of fact our area was not chosen because there were a lot of new houses in the area, but I insisted that, with the neighborhood backing me, that we needed some representation out in that area too. So I finally, they had men who did some investigation to find out how long we had been in existence and as I explained to them about the creek incident, the kid getting drowned and they finally accepted the Glen Elder Creek area into the neighborhood situation.

Clarence: What were your first impressions of Sacramento when you first moved here and where did you live, when you first moved to Sacramento?

Mr. Hicks: When I first moved to Sacramento I stayed at 19th and S Street and there was very, the nearest Black private that moved to the South area, south of Sacramento, at that time. My first impression was that it was like a beach head in a war zone here. You couldn't hardly find no place to rent and, but we had to dig in or we'd just have each family to a room, we had to stay where we could until the opportunities came along, you know? They finally built the housing tract on 6th and Broadway of prefabricated housing for 12 families, Black families, they moved 12 Black families into Sealy Circle in 51. In 1951 they, lawyer Colley got together and they had a series of churches and they demanded more integration. As I put, when they finally added on they put 80 Black families right together again. So they finally made them integrate these, Sealy Circle. Then they just began to build the first houses for the Blacks to move into in 1955. That's when I bought my place, the second house that, I bought a house in 47.

Clarence: Where was this, where was this house in 1955 located?

Mr. Hicks: In the Glen Elders area. Yeah, it was the first tract Blacks could move in new homes, a growing list of homes you couldn't qualify to move in them no way.

Clarence: So you think Glen Elders', even in its birth stages was conceived as a place where Blacks could live apart from other areas which had maybe agreements about where Blacks couldn't live there. Do you think Glen Elders' was designed as a Black area intentionally?

Mr. Hicks: In the beginning, yes. It was a well integrated area in the beginning, because you had a lot of quite a few military of all races moved in, but the economic situation was so slow that they couldn't expand to support supermarkets or nothing like that. So, they all had good intentions but, due to circumstances of the economic situation, you just couldn't move, you know? Everything had to stand still. Due to the economic background of the Blacks in general you might find a block, a two block home with 20 brand new cars but the economics of their background they couldn't organize enough to foresee until we got something going.

[Counter 50]

Clarence: What were the main reasons for the Sacramento Area Economic Opportunity Council's beginning?

Mr. Hicks: The main reason for the Economic Opportunity program was to, as President Johnson now would say looking at the mens where one men might stand and throughout the world we get represented throughout America coming from all the world and you see so many people in poverty and which this country is not a queen or king type state and people come from all asking these questions why you got so many poor people? So and the military people coming out of the Army and they wanted to see people come up and give them a chance to move up out of the gutter you see, out of the ghetto if they had the opportunity. Give them some base to grow on. If you make one man, while one man stand taller than the other, you know? So to build the outer man you see, as religious as the inner man, but the outer man to build him something to grow on.

Clarence: So the SAEOC was directly a result of the President's Johnson war on poverty?

Mr. Hicks: War on poverty to give, they created a catalyst for all. As a matter of fact at that time even the government installations you had about one percent Black above a GS-9. At all of your installations, that's the Army Depot.

Clarence: This is nationwide?

Mr. Hicks: Right. One percent above a GS-9 rating at that time, but as the war on poverty gave the Blacks an opportunity to stand tall and we'll say chair different boards, different committees, at that time and gave the opportunity for to foresight to visit all your various different organizations like the Board of Supervisors, the City Council, and they lagging it behind today

but they, but they gave that opportunity to move up front because for many years back unless you were a doctor, a lawyer, or a teacher you just was held back.

Clarence: What were some of the main issues locally that the SAEOC in its early days had to confront in Sacramento?

Mr. Hicks: Well, I practically predicted or foresee, I think Head Start was one of your biggest long way to give these kids a chance to a Head Start program. When they were three years old. A lot of the Black kids didn't have, the poor kids didn't have the opportunity to move up and when they got to school he didn't, he was so far behind the other kids, and so that gave the Head Start gave the average poor kid a chance to when he's going to school instead of playing with toys all the way up until the 5th, the first grade, he ready to, he's seen a lot of things, a lot of kids got a chance to go out to restaurants that never would have went out before the President's program came along. A lot of them didn't even go out to eat, McDonald's or any place. But they gave them some dignity, to in society a culture, a little higher American-style culture like.

Clarence: Did SAEOC also address other problems such as unemployment in the Black community?

Mr. Hicks: Yes that was part of the agenda, but the, there were so many other agencies that there was I guess at that point part of their downfall too. There were so many other agencies, they didn't sit with their agenda. The basic culture was to help steer them in that direction, helping [hard to hear, counter 086] education and get better jobs. But I think a lot of, probably

on the end they probably went to moving into other areas of employment, areas what they shouldn't have been. But the main thing was encouraging them to go to school and get education and move on up. Get them out of the rut of themselves, but too many people came out of the community, wasn't interested in the community in general, that held these jobs, and so they couldn't foresee what their main purpose was, see? So that was the problem.

Clarence: Could you explain something of the structure of the SAEOC as far as the type of leadership it was expected to exercise and maybe some of the organizations within SAEOC that came to be?

Mr. Hicks: Well in the more than, in the late years I don't, couldn't give you the exact on the later years, but in the beginning of the program of the first two years, during those years we had some very strong leadership operating the program. Because we had about seven or eight business people. You had one from the county, sister city managers were on the board, you had the one of the superintendents from the school in the Delta was on the board, a representative of the county, and you had the Department of Health, and all walks of life on the board.

[Counter 100]

Mr. Hicks: And even from the six communities. So you had such a complex background of people working together at that particular time but as time went on, as the money, they didn't have nothing to due with quite how to use the money, then that was a different ballgame. I couldn't say exactly overall how they was operating.

Clarence: What was the major source of funding for SAEOC in those days?

Mr. Hicks: The biggest source of funding? Well they gave each, I think it was basically \$5 million dollars to start it out with and each community had six men it had organizers in the community at that time. The basic structure, and these organizers were for to go into the community and make surveys to find out how much people are unemployed, how many in the family, how many education they had, and then encourage that particular family to move over on up and go into various mainstream. So there was other agencies had, as time went on they got funding for other different purpose, but I mean that was the basic purpose.

Clarence: Was the federal government the main source of income for the Sacramento Area Economic Opportunity Council?

Mr. Hicks: What?

Clarence: Was the federal government the main source of income?

Mr. Hicks: Yeah, main source. [hard to hear, counter 113]

Clarence: What was the ratio of federal money to local money?

Mr. Hicks: Well in the beginning of the program, it was designed, how the first years, were over 90%. The second year is for 90%, I mean 100% the first year, and 90% the second year. And each year they were supposed to, the basic they were supposed to drop down. The neighborhood was supposed to figure ways and means of generating money, meaning to get to be self support like an airplane getting off the ground, it was supposed to, but, as I said as they went along they got off the course and even though they were presenting an in kind share like some of the families would help, they would volunteer their time. The hours, they would count those hours towards the in kind share. I guess that as they went on with bad management they got off the course and didn't present the government, they didn't give us their 30% or 60% of the money and they couldn't come up with the other 40%. So they kept funding them right on up 100% all along. Except some hourly and in kind share that they showed to deduct from the 80% as they went along until the end.

Clarence: What kind of a response did you get from the community in the early days? Was it positive or negative?

Mr. Hicks: In the beginning we had some, there were some negative in the beginning, but not much. Some people said "well we're not in poverty, we don't need the program."

Clarence: Right.

Mr. Hicks: But then again, there was a lot of people came along and as they see it beginning to generate jobs and stuff like that they could see some good result. Uh, child care centers, the first

year, like I said, we generated I think it was \$80,000 for child care center for each six neighborhood. And they would give the mothers who was low income were supposed to put their kids in free of charge and give them a chance to get out and go to school, or go to work or all those kinds of situations. But as time went on you had people of all economic areas I guess went to, got jealous and went to moving into the program.

Clarence: So basically you are saying that what was started as a poverty program to aid people with low income turned out to be a boon for people of multi-income levels, like middle-class, or lower middle-class people who could probably afford to pay for it?

Mr. Hicks: I would think the poverty program, like I say, gave the some incentive to move up into middle-class quite a bit, yeah. It gave a lot of people the incentive to let them know that the opportunity was there, that they had to get up and get education and do something beyond what their forefathers had done you know. It was a good stepping stone.

Clarence: Can you give us the background of some of the early movers in the SAEOC as far as the original Board of Directors or some of the Executives that stood out in your mind as being effective?

Mr. Hicks: Uh, we had, let's see Carwell, a guy name Carwell from Garden, of the Washington neighborhood which was the Spanish neighborhood representing that group. He was very dynamic and strong and carried the vote, and myself, we, I swung most of the votes during that era, basically when things really got down to the nitty gritty, I mean, I would come through with

an idea and they would buy it and I introduced a subcommittee. I was on the [hard to hear, counter 149] subcommittee that helped brought like we had, would maybe have a few hundred people going into the main meeting demanding money.

[Counter 150]

Mr. Hicks: And so I, through the subcommittee that we'll have this priority subcommittee would handle all the grievance and make up, screen out the proposals and people who were applying for money for their background and then we would come back to the main body and make a motion to accept the priority subcommittee recommendation. Well you had five votes already with the [hard to hear, counter 154], who was president was six. So you had, all you need was one vote out of ten people to move. That's what kept us going on. There was quite a few other guys, I can't quote their names, I've got them scattered some place, that who had a workshop in San Rafael, who moved out of the area entirety and I remember Dr. Roth was one of the state appointees by I think it was Governor Brown, or Governor Knight at the time, and he was one of the state OEO. He was attending our meeting workshop and I spoke up that I represented 10,000 people at that time from the Glen Elder area. He wanted to know how I would represent 10,000 people and I asked him how the President Johnson represented 200 million people at that time? It was very dramatic and also there was a guy, the Superintendent of Schools, I think his name was something John, Johnson of the Delta. I blocked the, I made a motion to block the legal aid proposal when they first came out. I had it held up for 30 days so we could have a cross-section discussion among the people, which they did. But I had to give a dramatic statement to get to the floor at the time. I was challenged on that later. Just not in

public, just in private discussion. I think the Superintendent of the San Juan school he resigned after I did that, he said “the poor was running the program,” and that’s what it was designed for.

Clarence: Right.

Mr. Hicks: I guess, I don’t know if you remember that or not. He resigned that position in 1965.

Clarence: What effects do you think in the long run, did the SAEOC have on the City of Sacramento or the Sacramento County as far as alleviating poverty?

Mr. Hicks: Well I think the, like I said, the basic structure is why is now is the Head Start of the kids. A lot of those kids now who started out in Head Start then are 25 years old now and so most of these kids have jobs themselves and naturally they are going to bring their kids up in good, with a good sound education or in private school. So I still believe your Head Start went a long way in giving a lot of people some good sound leadership and a lot of people who did work with the program in the beginning went on to higher jobs in the county, and their kids, the generation in years to come are going to continue to get a better education and looking about, and they won’t be looking back you know? [Mr. Hicks laughs] So I think it, that is one of the basic structure of your –

Clarence: So you say that’s it has contributed some leadership skill to the impoverished in Sacramento County as far as giving them the tools to –

Mr. Hicks: Tools to work and give them the incentive to move up and it taught them how to go up and apply for jobs and many of them that didn't know how in the beginning, like I said that gave them an opportunity to go to night school and improve themselves quite a bit, in all agencies because during the beginning of that time, you didn't have no, there was no Black had served on no City Council, they had ran before, but none of them had been on the, since that time we've had Superintendent of the Sacramento School, City, was that before then there wasn't no such thing and the first Black superintendent that we've had the, well, the superintendent in Del Paso Heights since then. As a matter of fact we've had a Lieutenant Governor move up, it's been opened up completely. All everything, there are more Black senators and the whole works you know, has been generated.

Clarence: How did the SAEOC work in relationship to other poverty programs in other cities in California?

Mr. Hicks: I, you mean in Sacramento?

Clarence: The Sacramento SAEOC yes –

Mr. Hicks: I think in Sacramento I, near as I can think, Sacramento had some of the, one of the most best foundation of it, because their program was ran in college for many, many years completely independent from the City and other agencies.

[Counter 200]

Mr. Hicks: Where the other, most of the other programs was basically, was having problems all along, and so I think here in Sacramento they had much better background and whether it was better leadership or what happened to the people who put enough into the program to keep it going. Because it took quite a few, you know, quite a few years before they took it off and tied it in with the City structure.

Clarence: So you personally, have you found working in the SAEOC to be a rewarding experience, have you found that the things that it helped poor people to accomplish, did it help you to accomplish any goals or standards that you wanted to set for yourself?

Mr. Hicks: Uh, repeat that again?

Clarence: Did the poverty program as you, as you worked in it, did it help you to achieve any goals or standards that you set for yourself?

Mr. Hicks: Uh, myself?

Clarence: Yes.

Mr. Hicks: Well, I think various people have basically different characteristics of individuals and I think at my height I guess an overall teamwork you say, I could be either out in the desert

all by myself, but I think my, the, my height would have been about, would have appeared anyway. Its like today's education, you always are going to find some kids going to excel regardless to the situation of whatever happened. So therefore, at the time, I was just like having a car ready to run, I was ready to move up regardless to the situation with the program to help make it go, make it work, as you would say now. To help other people. So that's the main thing that you can't, I think we're put here to help people, so that was my main goal to help people, so I [hard to hear, counter 224] well where you get too selfish, where you can't look out trying to help people then you are really doing yourself an injustice too. Because during the time of this program, when I was doing this work with the program, I had seven kids, I didn't go into it for money, it wasn't for money, I was volunteering my time. So I did think, there were a lot of people who went in there to, whether they were volunteers or what, they went in there to, and they played politics to move up in the other direction I'm saying. You know what I'm saying? There were a few people who were dedicated, and I know I could say myself, was dedicated to helping the basic structure of people. Not only that to make my kids too come along, which this, are you going to rewrite this on the tape?

Clarence: Not necessarily.

Mr. Hicks: What?

Clarence: Not necessarily.

Mr. Hicks: Because some of my kids had the opportunity to work, go into the program when they first got started, but normally they probably, they didn't even know that I was working for the program, until I showed them the clipping in the paper. A lot of time, I guess my wife thought I was out [hard to hear, counter 238] around,

Clarence: [laughs]

Mr. Hicks: Like we'll say Jesus Christ was in the temple working with people, you know, you do what you had to do. What you felt necessary to carry everything on. That's the way it was.

Clarence: So you felt, you feel personal satisfaction for the time you worked?

Mr. Hicks: Oh yeah, I was very enthusiastic about the, I practically didn't [hard to hear, counter 243] you can just see, I have a later letter than that, but just the old one.

Clarence: Well Mr. Hicks I thank you a lot for the interview, and thanks for your time.

Mr. Hicks: Do you think you'd want to take the [tape ends]

[Tape one, Side one ends, Interview over]

[Counter 249]